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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SOCI PHUM PREF PINR RS GG  
SUBJECT: TFGG01: MINIMAL BACKLASH FOR GEORGIAN DIASPORA  
OVER CONFLICT IN SOUTH OSSETIA

Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells; reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite current hostilities, we see no evidence of a repeat of the fall 2006 anti-Georgian campaign in Russia. On August 12, Georgian Charge in Moscow told us that the Georgian community in Russia was suffering no backlash from the outbreak of hostilities. We also have not heard of any violence directed against the large Georgian diaspora in Russia, and Medvedev went to great lengths August 11 to stress the need for tolerance. An extremist fringe youth group announced its intent to develop a list of locations in Moscow in which Georgian illegal immigrants live. FSB Chief Aleksandr Bortnikov announced August 11 that Russian law enforcement had arrested nine agents of the Georgian Secret Service who are suspected of collecting political and military information. Russia's head prosecutor said August 12 that his office would investigate the role of foreign intelligence services in Georgia's military operations in South Ossetia. Moscow-based Georgian diaspora groups have taken steps to distance themselves from Saakashvili and emphasized historical peaceful ties between Georgians and Russians. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In an August 12 meeting, Georgian Charge Givi Shugarov told us that the Georgian community in Russia was suffering no backlash from the outbreak of hostilities. Shugarov praised the August 11 comments by Medvedev underscoring the need for tolerance as "welcome and striking." He noted that there were no signals to suggest any return of the virulent anti-Georgian campaign of fall 2006. The Embassy continued to be harassed by pro-Kremlin youth group and Cossack protesters, and while we were at the Embassy the megaphone comments of the 30-50 protesters, interspersed occasionally by loud music, were audible. While Shugarov said the Embassy had formally protested the scurrilous public comments being made by the protesters about Saakashvili, they had no complaint over the level of police protection. Georgian Embassy officers (with the non-consular ranks numbering four) are routinely followed by two vehicles when they move about town, which -- if it was driven by GOR security concerns -- Shugarov characterized as positive. In any event, the Georgian minders were polite and "acted appropriately."

¶3. (C) Shugarov flagged Medvedev's meeting with FSB chief Aleksandr Bortnikov, in which Bortnikov briefed on the capture of nine "so-called" Georgian intelligence agents. Media had not played up initially whether the alleged spies were ethnic Georgian, or merely on a Georgian payroll, but Shugarov feared that the news report could be picked up by Russian nationalist elements.

¶4. (SBU) Later on August 12 the FSB made public the names of the suspects and some of the circumstances of their detention. Included was the name of an ethnic-Georgian lieutenant colonel in the Russian army detained in July 2008 who admitted to have been recruited in January 2006 while visiting relatives in Georgia. The FSB claimed that another Russian citizen of Georgian descent had been recruited by the

leader of a terrorist group in the Pankisi Gorge to look for like-minded extremists in Ingushetiya and other areas in Russian southern region. On August 12 the Russian Prosecutor General's Office announced that its Investigation Committee would probe the role of foreign intelligence services in Georgia's military operations in South Ossetia. Committee head Aleksandr Bastrykin told a state-controlled television channel that its investigators will also question captured Georgian servicemen as part of a criminal inquiry into the killing of civilians and Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia.

¶15. (SBU) Prosecutor General Yuriy Chayka assured Georgian citizens living in Russia August 12 that there will not be any negative actions towards them. He noted that Medvedev

had instructed the Interior Ministry to stop any such actions and that all "necessary legal methods" will be used to prevent them.

DPNI Promises Harassment, but No Violence Yet

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¶16. (SBU) The Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) leader Alexander Belov announced on August 11 the organization's intent to raid Moscow areas where ethnic Georgians tend to congregate. Belov called the initiative "peaceful," noting that DPNI members would only question neighbors of suspected illegal immigrant Georgians, then turn in any suspicious evidence to the appropriate authorities. Additionally, DPNI planned to create housing lists of places where illegal Georgians reside and Georgian criminals meet.

¶17. (SBU) SOVA Director Aleksandr Verkhovskiy told PolOff

August 12 that his information sources did not know of any actions taken against Georgians in Moscow. Komsomolskaya Pravda reported August 12 that Georgian restaurants, mostly staffed by Russians, continued to operate normally despite the current conflict in South Ossetia. According to the Director of the Georgian diaspora in Moscow, 400,000 to 500,000 Georgians live in the Russian capital, and another 500,000 Georgians reside in the Russian regions. Most Georgians worked in goods trade, community work, and in construction. On the other hand, the article noted that a significant portion of the diaspora operated criminal enterprises -- casinos, restaurants, and banks; others were pickpockets or apartment thieves.

Georgians in Russia Distance Themselves from Saakashvili

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¶18. (SBU) Georgian diaspora leaders viewed events in South Ossetia with trepidation and dismay. Badri Meladze, president of the Foundation for Assistance to the Georgian People, told reporters that Saakashvili did not act in the interests of his people, but rather for those in third countries like the U.S., and has brought Georgia to the brink of catastrophe. Director of the United Russian and Georgian Peoples Foundation Doctor Vladimir Homeriki did not believe Saakashvili would remain in office long, noting that the majority of Georgians in Russia did not support him. He blamed Saakashvili for committing "satanic acts" of aggression in South Ossetia against "brotherly Ossetians," and stated that only the nationalist youth in Georgia supported Saakashvili.

¶19. (SBU) The Union of Georgians in Russia posted a statement on its website August 8 that expressed deep concern over developments in South Ossetia, regretted all loss of life, called on all parties to suspend hostilities and supported calls by the international community to stop the fighting. On August 11 it again appealed to Saakashvili and Medvedev to end the military confrontation. On August 11 its representatives met with members of the Ossetian diaspora in Moscow at which the two sides stressed the need for residents of the two communities not to succumb to the provocations of the military conflict in South Ossetia.

Comment

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¶10. (U) Thankfully, despite the cancellation of flights and postal service, we see no evidence of a reprisal of the fall 2006 anti-Georgian campaign in Russia.

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